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Second Thoughts

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Second Thoughts

Today was one of the coldest of the year, something like eight or ten degrees. The bright sunlight made it seem warmer until I'd been out a while and felt my face become numb. Bundled up against the cold, I drove to the grocery store.

As I finished placing my bags in the back of my car, a woman walked toward me from the adjacent aisle of the parking lot. This woman was dressed appropriately for the weather with a nice black-hooded jacket, scarf and gloves. She sought my attention by raising her hand as I opened the door on the driver's side. I stopped, with one foot in the car, to hear her question.

"Excuse me, but can you help me?" she asked, a look of distress on her face.

I thought she was having car trouble, so questioned, "What is it?"

Lifting a cord around her neck, to which a plastic rectangle was attached, she replied, "I'm homeless. This is my P.A.D.S. number. Could you spare a few dollars so I can get something to eat?"

I paused, gathering my thoughts, my mind going through the things I'd heard about panhandlers and the con games that are played upon unsuspecting fools. But, the reality of the cold day and the current joblessness cast their vote in favor of my giving her the few dollar bills I had in my purse. I knew I had some singles, which I could easily spare. I also had a couple of twenties, but that would be too much--especially if it was a con. It's amazing how fast the mind can zip through the decision-making process.

As I opened my purse and began searching for the dollar bills, I was reminded of the woman, a walking skeleton, holding a starving baby, who'd once approached me in Kathmandu in 1999.

Before we reached Nepal, we'd been warned by the tour directors not to give the beggars anything, tempted though we may be, for it would only encourage more beggars to hound us as we walked the streets.

This skeletal woman had obviously been starving. She may also have had AIDS, which was then epidemic in the city. Her brown skin struggled to cover her prominent skull. With arms so thin, each bone was outlined against the parchment covering it, she held a tiny child. This baby, with a large head

and shrinking body, lay inert in the woman's arms. The baby's large eyes, with barely enough strength to blink, gazed listlessly into mine as I shook my head, refusing the request. "Just following orders," I said to myself, while my stomach clutched in rebellion. I had only a few small coins with me at the time, so I talked myself into believing that they would have made little difference in her life. Maybe for the moment the pangs of hunger would have been abated, until tomorrow. I could not save their lives.

So, anxious to get away from her pleading hands, my friend and I quickly walked on to the Kodak store, to buy more film, which had been our goal.

We discussed our decision as we placed a dusty distance between ourselves and the woman with the child. "Tsk, tsk," our tongues snapped, as pity and guilt wrapped around us like a cloak.

There were so many beggars in the streets of Kathmandu; we were forced to stop seeing them. It was just too difficult to allow the feeling of impotence, in the face of such need, to overwhelm us. We must protect ourselves, we reassured each other.

Now, today, I am once again reminded, as I handed the woman in the parking lot four measly dollar bills. As I closed the door and started the car, she wished me God's blessing. I briefly allowed myself to feel the cold she'd feel by spending most of her day in the streets. I removed the fur earmuffs from my head and placed them on the passenger seat. I was suddenly too warm in my heated car. Glancing back I saw her walking across the parking lot with a backpack on her arm.

As I pulled away, the baby's eyes suddenly peered out at me from my memory. They have haunted me for years, reminding me of my regret at withholding those few coins I held in my pocket where they might have provided some temporary relief. Torn between obeying the tour director's instructions and my feelings for a needy human being, I'd made the wrong decision!

I can still see the sari-draped woman with her child lying listlessly upon her arm slowly cross the street as we, relieved, entered the Kodak store. I never saw them again, but I have carried them in my memory where they will live as long as I remember.

As I drove away in my warm car, with the bags of groceries spilling over in the back, I said aloud, "Why didn't I give that homeless woman a twenty-dollar bill instead of only four?"

Alas, I have no answer to assuage my guilt. I am not accustomed to beggars in my little corner of this world. They fill me with shame. I want

to turn my back and run as I did in Nepal. Though I still empathize with the suffering of others, I find it most discomforting. What to do?

Now, I'm left with another disturbing incident that has attached itself like Velcro to my memory. It will revolve in my mind like a record on the turntable of my regrets. 'Round and 'round the memory turns, it's a constant reminder of my selfishness.

-M.J. Bressler

Paid in Full

It's not my fault that I agree
With donors on a spending spree.
Their junkets, checks and gifts of note
Are never meant to sway my vote.
But when these friends need a favor,
I'm their legislative savior.

Defense contractors phone before
Each crucial vote to fund more war.
Wall Street tycoons applaud their fate
Assured that I'll deregulate.
Job creators demand less tax.
They count on me to wield the axe.

The NRA says weapons should
Be owned by all for their own good.
Guns everywhere, I plead their case,
Of course they're banned from my workplace.
Big Oil comes forth to fill my till,
I join their chant: drill, baby, drill.

Smart lobbyists, it's plain to see,
Invest in my integrity.

We have the best government money can buy.

-John J. Gordon